

On the very idea that social anthropology can contribute to the study of specialization

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Abstract. I present an argument against the very idea that anthropology can contribute to the study of specialization. But an obvious reply is “Actually anthropologists at home can study specialization.” I provide some details concerning this reply, focusing on incentives to specialize directed at sensitive souls.

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Economists famously recommend specialization and a division of labour, going back to Adam Smith at least, assuming he counts (1776: Book I, Chapter I). But what about social anthropology? What can social anthropology contribute to the study of specialization? The very idea that anthropology has anything to contribute may seem mistaken. Consider the following propositions:

- (1) Social anthropology is the study of primitive societies.
- (2) Definition: a society is primitive if and only if it lacks specialization.
- (3) If social anthropology is the study of societies which lack specialization, then social anthropology has nothing to contribute to the study of specialization.

From (2) and (3) – by definitional substitution – we can infer the following:

- (4) If social anthropology is the study of primitive societies, then social anthropology has nothing to contribute to the study of specialization.

From (1) and (4) – by modus ponens – we can infer:

(5) Social anthropology has nothing to contribute to the study of specialization.

How can anthropologists resist this argument?

Anthropologists today also pursue “anthropology at home,” in societies such as the UK which involve specialization, lots of it. And anthropology has something to contribute here. When explaining why there is specialization, or why there should be, economists seem to first and foremost imagine self-interested individuals who find it in their material interests to specialize and trade. For example, I don’t want to especially do cleaning and neither do you, but I am better at cleaning the kitchen and you are better at cleaning the toilet, and so we decide on a division of labour: I shall specialize in cleaning up the kitchen and you get to enjoy the clean kitchen; and you clean up the toilet and I get to enjoy that! I think what fieldwork in the style of anthropology will often reveal is that specialization is maintained by a series of incentives that do not appear in economic texts and which are not transparently about material interests – they act on sensitive souls! (And who is not sensitive, kept awake at night even by a horrid remark?) Below are some examples inspired by academic life.

Insults. An anthropologist finds that authors in an academic field who used to write in a narrow specialism and then began writing in an accessible way for wider audiences on a variety of topics are often insulted: “He used to be good,” “I don’t know what he is doing now,” etc. Who wants to be insulted like that? These insults provide an incentive against doing anything but contributing to a narrow specialism.

Application feedback. A teaching assistant who taught for twenty years in department A and ten years in department B applies for a lectureship in department B. They are not shortlisted. When they try to get information about why not, they are told that they do not have enough

teaching experience. They draw attention to relevant experience in department A. And, intuitively, there are some courses from A and B which have more in common with each other than courses in their respective departments – ethics in the philosophy department and “political theory” in the politics department, say. But they are told that the courses they taught in department A do not count for much. Responses such as this contribute to keeping people specialized.

Cowritten works. An anthropologist finds out about the following trend: if a person from discipline A has a relationship with a person from discipline B and they write a work together, the resultant work is not cited in discipline A. This does not require anthropology, but anthropology might be very useful for finding out about this. One talks to people and some people tell you about this. “Ever since that relationship, I am no longer classed as an economist by my colleagues,” your host tells you tearfully.

In conclusion, it is plausible that specialization is maintained by a number of incentives directed at sensitive souls, as the remarks above indicate. Anthropology at home can help reveal these incentives.

Reference

Smith, A. 1904 (originally 1776). *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*. London: Methuen. Available at: <http://www.econlib.org/library/Smith/smWN.html>